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Edited by Gabriele Vom Bruck and Barbara Bodenhorn

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## “Entangled in Histories”: An Introduction to the Anthropology of Names and Naming

BARBARA BODENHORN AND GABRIELE VOM BRUCK

Immediately after the attack on the World Trade Center in September 2001, naming the victims and the culprits became an urgent matter. Lists of names – of living and dead – were posted daily. For some time there were names that could not be put with certainty in either category. And there were daunting traces of human bodies that could not be attached with certainty to a particular name. “It is terrible to think that a person will go into the ground . . . [without] a name,” Susan Black, a forensic anthropologist, said in a different context, adding that once the bodies are identified, families can begin mourning.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Thomas Laqueur has argued that finding and naming the Bosnian victims of genocide in the 1990s seemed the only emotionally possible beginning for a survivor’s new life.<sup>2</sup>

Although most of those who perished in the World Trade Center attack were eventually named, many families had, literally, no body to bury. On the other hand, the “true” names of most of the perpetrators remained unknown. Passports attributed to attackers failed to provide adequate clues, many stolen from people far from the scene. In this instance naming was put to the task of establishing moral accountability, while the mistaken attribution of guilt was vehemently rejected by those who felt wronged.

The need to identify the dead by name in New York links, in a very different context, with its polar opposite – the act of de-naming as a form of political annihilation. During the recent conflict with their Serb neighbors, Kosovo Albanian refugees had to turn in all official forms of identification at the Yugoslav border. The Serb authorities thus annulled their right to live in their homeland; their existence became illegitimate in the eyes of the State. “Their names are being ripped off them quite literally” (Moraru 2000:50). Similarly, the demolition of graveyards and statues often dehumanizes the dead by obliterating their names from memory. After Israel’s withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, for instance, local Muslims cut the plaques carrying

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the names of the South Lebanon Army (SLA) collaborators from the shrine meant to honor them. They were, as Robert Fisk noted, “killing the dead.”<sup>3</sup>

In Britain the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> reopened the debate about the introduction of national identity cards, provoking *The Economist* to note that “identity theft” is growing in America and might intensify in Britain if such cards were implemented.<sup>4</sup> That names may be valuable economically as well as politically is by no means new but technological developments throw the property-potential in names into stark relief – whether for credit card fraud or for sale as a copyrighted domain name.

That identities can be stolen, traded, suspended, and even erased through the name reveals the profound political power located in the capacity to name; it illustrates the property-like potential in names to transact social value; and it brings into view the powerful connection between name and self-identity. How these factors intersect, collide, and influence each other to produce different effects is a theme running through the book. It goes some way to explain why names seem simultaneously ubiquitous and infinitely changeable in their meaning. It allows us to see patterns in what might at first glance seem to be simply cultural variation. That names are thought to have the capacity to fix identity creates a tension with their capacity to detach from those identities. Thus the stark realities confronted in the crises above expose the potential moral and cultural instability experienced by named selves as well as the ongoing and socially interconnected histories names may generate.

To return to our opening image, the lists of names produced in the aftermath of September 11th have already rapidly shifted from offering a way of coping with the present to a mode of commemorating the past and of imagining the future. In many contexts – whether those structuring ancient Roman oration form, Kwakiutl potlatch invocations, Papua New Guinea funeral feasts, or World War II memorials – the recitation of names is a crucial aspect of memory, an active not-forgetting, that validates the present order more often than not, bringing the political aspect into view.

Since the 1970s, anthropologists have paid considerable attention to discursive naming practices employed by dominant groups to secure and maintain power.<sup>5</sup> Governments and institutions the world over supervise individuals’ activities by means of birth certificates, license plates, passwords, permits, house numbers, and street names. British law requires parents to register a child’s birth and its name within six weeks.<sup>6</sup> This might, at first glance, seem a straightforward practice of governmental control. In systems framed through an ideology of individualism, individual legal status certainly makes tracking easier for states. But it allows for individual claims upon – and protection from – states as well, one reason why official de-naming is an act of such

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violence. It also hides the fact the people are more than just subjects of government oversight. They are also parents, neighbors, or friends, taking part in all sorts of relationships that may well have political implications, but that cannot simply be about politics. The right to a name is enshrined in the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, recognizing the implications of carrying a name that begin at the earliest moments of social being. To echo Geertz (1973: 363), naming is a crucial aspect of converting “anybodies” into “somebodies.”

These other sorts of social relations realized through names are as likely to emerge bottom up as to be imposed from the top down. The law does not care if a name “fits” the child. But it is a matter of great concern to name-givers across many cultures for whom names both express something of the child and reveal their relations to that child. Diminutives, pet names, and nicknames often pay scant regard to formal ones, but they are deeply meaningful to those employing them as revealed below by a Brazilian mother on Alto de Cruzeiro:

“Some baptize their infants right away, sick or well. Others wait for a heavy sickness to scare them into baptism. But the baby will always have a name, whether they are baptized or not. But it is only their official name. . . . To have a real name, a baby has to live long enough to have a little, endearing nickname. For that is how we actually come to love our babies, when they begin to show us **who they are and what kind of being we now have here**. We can begin to see the kind of child he will be, wild or gentle, fast or slow. . . . As his history begins to gather around him, that’s when . . . we don’t want him to leave us!” (In Scheper-Hughes 1992:438; emphasis added)

Because others usually name us, the act of naming has the potential to implicate infants in relations through which they become inserted into and, ultimately will act upon, a social matrix. Individual lives thus become entangled – through the name – in the life histories of others.<sup>7</sup> As suggested in the previous section and illustrated throughout this volume, how that sociality emerges through naming is often a process of discovery, divination, recognition, or inheritance rather than simply a matter of assignation. Babies – and often names themselves – are frequently assumed to have significant agency. The power of the name itself, which varies cross-culturally, often thus plays a critical role in social life. An acknowledgment of this introduces an important element to our analysis, which would be missed if we remained at the level of a purely political understanding. Questions of what personal names “are” cross-culturally therefore comprise another underlying theme of this volume.

One of the patterns to emerge in the volume overall is the extent to which names carry with them the capacity, not only to delineate the boundaries of social status, but also to bridge them. Names may reveal crucial information

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about gender, kinship, geographical origin, or religion. At the same time, they may also provide the vehicle for crossing boundaries between those very same categories, as well as between life and death, past and future, humans and non-humans. Here we return our attention to the capacity of names to fix and to detach. The potential for the name to become identical with the person creates the simultaneous potential to fix them as individuals and as members of recognized social groups. It is their detachability that renders names a powerful political tool for establishing or erasing formal identity, and gives them commodity-like value. And it is precisely their detachability that allows them to cross boundaries. How these capacities combine and recombine, bringing boundaries into view and bridging others, provides another through line in the volume.

As illustrated in the chapters to come, cultural practices around naming combine several key concerns in recent social theory: embodied personhood, gendered subjectivity, displacement, semantic and biographic memory, the power of discourse, and symbolic analysis more generally. Recent anthropological engagement with these issues has generally sidelined or neglected names and naming altogether. In calling attention to this omission, we have concentrated primarily on the exploration of personal names.<sup>8</sup>

Each of the following chapters stands on its own as a piece of ethnographic analysis. Overall, we hold the question of name in focus through interconnected themes: considering names themselves as meaningful, examining the processes involved in naming, and asking what is at stake in speaking, or not speaking, names. Taken as a whole, the book begins with a consideration of personal names and naming as fundamental aspects of social processes that have critical bearing on anthropological understanding of personhood, kinship, and gender. As the volume progresses, questions of power are increasingly brought into view.

We turn now to a consideration of thematic issues, issues that inform and are informed by anthropological work already in existence, with reference to the specific arguments made by the contributors to the book. The first of these, largely stemming from the study of language both inside and outside of anthropology, centers on the question of what names are as words: arbitrary signs allocated by convention or something more? Comparative ethnography reveals that names are often thought to express – and in some instances even to form – core elements of one's person. The importance of convention should, as we shall see, remain part of the analysis nonetheless.

We move then to an examination of the interrelationship between performance as symbolic expression and performance as effective action. This in particular links our examination of the political implications of naming itself

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with our consideration of kinship, gender, bodies, and personhood. Names “do” as well as “say” things, just as naming expresses as well as constitutes social relations. Thus, as Herzfeld (1982) pointed out some time ago, whereas names as signs are considered as discursive practices involving naming, it is important as well to bring social context into the frame. We are as interested in understanding the importance of names as a crucial element in what people do as individuals and as collectivities as they are for what people say.

## THEMATIC ISSUES: NAMES, NAMING, LANGUAGE

*Convention and Essence*

The ambiguous relationship between names and the things they refer to has been of philosophical interest for a long time. As such, this has both informed anthropological inquiry and illuminated ways in which anthropologists may be asking quite distinct questions. Plato (1970) already sets out a number of issues in the *Cratylus* dialogues that have continued to be debated ever since. In brief, Cratylus holds what would today be called the “natural language” position: “everything has a right name for itself,” (1970:7) whereas Hermogenes “cannot come to the conclusion that there is any correctness of names other than convention and agreement” (ibid.:9). Socrates destabilizes both positions and in doing so, introduces political factors that resonate strongly in the papers to come. Even though Hermogenes asserts that “anyone” has the right to decide on a name, Socrates is quick to point out that slaves, for instance, cannot name either themselves or their masters. Whether from the point of view of the individual or the collective, the source of the name cannot be left up to anyone. Questions of who has the right – or responsibility – to name, what that means, and to what extent names “ought to fit” the nominee form a *leit-motif* throughout this volume. Two further pairs of philosophical categories should be noted because they inform so much social anthropological analysis of names and naming systems.

*Denotation and Connotation*

J. S. Mill (1843) is often invoked as the philosopher who defined names as “meaningless markers.”<sup>9</sup> In *A System of Logic*, Mill (1974:979–81) draws the distinction between denotation (identification) and connotation (meaning). Names, he claims, denote without connotation. He notes that proper names “attach to objects, not their attributes.” Dartmouth may well have been named because it was founded at the mouth of the River Dart. It would remain

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Dartmouth if the river silted up or changed course. The literal meaning of the name tells us nothing certain about the identity of the named thing. “The only names of substance which connote nothing are proper names . . . A proper name is merely an unmeaning mark . . . which we endeavor to connect with the idea of the object in our heads. . . . Objects thus ticketed with proper names resemble, until we know something more about them, men and women in masks. We can distinguish them, but can conjecture nothing with respect to their real features.”

Mill is correct to point out that George and King George III convey significantly different orders of information. And it is clear that the former sorts of names may well be meaningless markers, telling us nothing about the persons to whom they refer. For several decades in the twentieth century, the Canadian government named its Inuit citizens from birth by issuing identity numbers, to be worn like dog tags, which were meant to be the only mode of identification in any state transactions (see Scott, Tehranian, and Mathias, 2002). The politics of this is discussed more fully later on. However, there are clearly also conditions under which names may be (and often must be) chosen for their lexical meaning. Japanese parents choose their children’s names according to two criteria: a felicitous meaning and a visually pleasing aspect (Akio Tsuchiya, personal communication); African Nuer and Tallensi birth names convey specific information about the circumstances in which a child entered the world (Evans-Pritchard, 1964; Fortes, 1955). According to Layne (this volume), books of names with their lexical meanings are regular best sellers in the United States. For the moment, we recognize the usefulness in being aware of the philosophically distinct categories without accepting any assumption that names must necessarily fall into one or the other. More often than not, however, as Lambek, Bodenhorn, and Humphrey argue in their contributions here, the power of names lies not in their linguistic meaning, but in the name itself. To understand what names mean, we must get beyond the debate itself, asking what they are as well as what they signify.

*Sense, Reference and the Problem of “Descriptive Backing”*

Mill notes that “Sophrionicus” and “the father of Socrates” are both “names of the same object” but with different meaning. The former identifies the man; the latter tells us something about him (1974:981). Frege (1949) uses the same kind of example to draw the distinction between sense and reference. Reference points to an object; sense is the context that gives it meaning. “Mr. Jones” and “Henry” may or may not refer to the same person. Only with the context can we judge whether or not the statement, “Mr. Jones is Henry” makes sense. Searle (1958) as well argues that proper names do not mean in

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themselves, but “descriptive backing” is available that points to the identity of the named. The sense-creating context has to do with the person, not with any lexical meaning of the name itself.

Kripke (1980) challenges Searle’s notion that the identity of the name is knowable through contextual information. “Nixon” and/or “Venus” remain Nixon and Venus regardless of how much new information may be discovered about them. The “cluster” of information, he argues, is changed rather than the name. Proper names, Kripke suggests, are “rigid designators” that continue to act as referents as long as links remain “through a community of speakers to the person in question” (1980:104). Contextualizing information may help to fix the referent, but it does not become synonymous with it (1980:135).

In *Naming and Necessity*, Kripke engages with a number of issues, such as “natural kinds” – or classification – that are close to anthropologists’ hearts. But he does not ask if all of the things he lumps together into the category of “proper name” are satisfactorily considered the same order of things. It is thus assumed that personal and planet names may be subjected to the same analytical process. Kripke’s important epistemological question – how may we know to what names refer? – invites the anthropological response, how do we know what “names” are? From a comparative perspective, one of the questions we are asking is to what extent personal (human) names are of the same or different order of thing than any other sort of proper name. How, in other words, are names meaningful? What sorts of knowledge must be taken into account when trying to understand with any degree of certainty to whom a name refers? The notion of “rigid designator” might well apply to the secret name with which a senior Avatip hunter calls crocodiles (see Harrison, 1990:47) for that name is assumed never to change. As a form of secret knowledge, it must be passed on through a community of knowers in precisely the way Kripke proposes. In this volume, Hansen suggests that the official names of city streets, squares, and monuments in South Africa are likewise intended to function as rigid designators, fixing and authorizing a particular past. For Hansen, the key is *intended* function, for he, like most historians, is well aware that today’s rigid designator may be eliminated tomorrow, shifting not only names, but also the histories they contain. The notion will not apply at all in naming systems in which people’s names change over the course of their lifetime or in systems where, as Iteanu discusses in this volume, people belong to a name rather than the reverse. In such societies, names erase rather than enshrine particular, individual pasts. One of the anthropological tasks of this volume is to recognize the possibility of different ontological positions regarding what names are, positions that need to be explored before we can ask questions about how we can know what they point to.

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Although Kripke builds on what he considers the crucial importance of a continuous speech community, he does not distinguish the kinds of speech acts naming encompasses. What it means to give a name and to speak a name provide significantly separate entry points into a cross-cultural analysis of names and naming. We turn, then, to more linguistic treatments of naming as speech. Ricoeur (1976) points out that, as the source of significant context, the meaning of a word is open, “pointing to” the world of experience. As governed by grammar, words make sense only if they conform to the closed, self-referential logic of their particular linguistic system. Wilson (1998) and Nicolaisen (1976, 1978), both working on European personal names, and Holland (1990) on nicknaming, all note that proper (personal) names are part of language as code and as such, convey significant amounts of information. They cannot simply refer to themselves, but rather need to be examined as words embedded in grammar that is made meaningful in a social world.

Within Social Anthropology, Mauss, Lévy-Bruhl, and Lévi-Strauss approached this coded aspect of names by exploring the connection between personal names and classification. In his lecture, “A category of the human mind,” Mauss (1985) recognizes that names may simultaneously identify individuals and classify persons into groups. He notes that clan societies often slot people into a fixed universe of names, drawing on the Latin notion of *persona* (the dramatic character represented by the mask) to analyze these societies in which names are not only constantly recycled, but linked to specific ritual obligation. Here we have an echo of Mill; names “ticket” people, but reveal nothing of the personality behind the mask.

The extent to which masks may conceal in order to protect is striking. In Sierra Leone, for instance, Ferme (2001) suggests that Mende masks (which carry their own names) are believed to form a protective barrier between the persons within and the potentially dangerous powers with whom they are engaging. From Mongolia to the Congo, “ugly” or “silly” names that mask the value of a child, thus protecting them from witches, jealous spirits, and the like, are not uncommon. How names may protect is explored in several chapters of this volume. Humphrey provides ethnographic material from Mongolia fitting the above pattern exactly. Iteanu’s work among Orokaiva in Papua New Guinea, on the other hand, presents us with the suggestion that a “thick layer” of names is what is needed to prevent the collapse of the cosmos. Working in Amazonia, Hugh-Jones considers ways in which Tukonoan names and songs are involved in concealing as well as revealing aspects of social relations that transcend many sorts of boundaries. Vom Bruck uses her work in Yemen to

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explore the way in which women taking on a male name generate a sort of protective layer, allowing them to operate in otherwise forbidden contexts. The mask-like potential of names thus can be put to a great many different sorts of tasks.<sup>10</sup>

As we have mentioned, naming practices may express information about a broad range of social classification. European names, among others, can provide information about gender, kinship, class, marriage, ethnicity, and religion, reflecting existing classificatory groups. In many societies, changes in social status are reflected by name changes and in some, the name change effects the shift in status. As Hugh-Jones and Bloch discuss in this volume, parents in Amazonia, as in Madagascar are known by teknonyms (the mother/father of so-and-so). According to Evans-Pritchard (1964), Nuer birth (or true) names are followed by patronyms, matronyms, teknonyms, clan praise names, ox-names, and dance names. Similarly Renato Rosaldo's (1984) discussion of Ilongot naming practices includes birth order names, childhood names, friendship names, nicknames, teknonyms, and necronyms.

Although Evans-Pritchard and Rosaldo acknowledge the classificatory aspect of these name categories, each emphasizes that names are used as a way of negotiating social relations. Once again, with the recognition that names are part of a linguistic code, we come to the intersection between the logically closed nature of a classification system and the open nature of speech acts – of using names as an expression of contingent relationships. And, as Bloch (1971a) has noted for the use of kinship terms, Evans-Pritchard is explicit that these modes of address “serve to evoke the response implied in the particular relationship” (1964:221).<sup>11</sup> In many situations, as Bodenhorn explores in her chapter (Chapter 7), people are faced with the possibility of choosing among acceptable names, the choice reflecting conscious strategies concerning the relationship thus potentiated.

Shortly before Mauss delivered his original lecture, Lévy-Bruhl (1926) also discussed the classificatory nature of naming, recognizing as well that for many peoples, names are more than classificatory labels. To a significant extent, he asserts, some people *are* their names. “[They] regard their names as something concrete and real and frequently sacred. . . . For such a person, a name is a distinct part of his personality, just as much as are his eyes . . . and [he] believes that injury will result as surely from the malicious handling of his names as from a wound inflicted on any part of his physical organism. . . .”<sup>12</sup> Like Evans-Pritchard, Lévy-Bruhl examines the connection between names and social relationships, but he also acknowledges the extent to which for some people at least, it is the name itself that effects the relationships.

Lévi-Strauss (1966:172) also pays attention to names as words. They are code and, therefore, are transformable. Later in *The Savage Mind*, he expands this

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to an examination of naming as practice:

“At one extreme, the name . . . establishes that the individual . . . is a member of a preordained class. . . . At the other extreme, the name is a free creation on the part of the individual who **gives the name**. . . . But can one be said to be really naming in either case? The choice seems only to be between identifying someone else by assigning him to a class, or, under cover of giving him a name, identifying oneself through him. One therefore never names: one classes someone else . . . one classes oneself . . . And most commonly one does both” (1966:181; emphasis in the original).

This is an important question, and one that is explored specifically by Lambek with reference to spirit names, and Bodenhorn with reference to the possibility of self-naming among Iñupiat. However, Lévi-Strauss’s discussion defines naming purely as a classificatory act. We have already suggested that the analysis of naming practices should not be reduced to politics. By the same token we are equally certain that these processes cannot be relegated to forms of classification.

Although names are clearly words and must be understood as such, Lévy-Bruhl points the way beyond the Lévi-Straussian trap of reducing names to signifiers, a point Bloch elaborates in his examination of Zafimaniry naming in Madagascar. Names may reflect classification systems but we must also leave room for asking what they are as potentially powerful things in themselves, aspects of the self as much as signifiers of the social person. Although Lévy-Bruhl assumes that the thing-like quality of names is a function of non-Western thinking, we reject such dichotomies. Even in Western contexts it is clear that names “are” more than simply code. In this volume, Layne’s examination of the importance parents in the United States attach to naming their stillborn children illustrates dramatically the extent to which (some) Western naming practices can simultaneously draw on the denotative aspect – allowing children to be remembered and mourned actively – and the connotative potential of names. “Jonathan,” “Evan,” or “Erin,” for example, may be chosen precisely because of their literal meaning to be given to children who will never respond to them.<sup>13</sup> As we shall see, concerns about finding the “right name,” whether in suburban Connecticut, or in an Iñupiaq community in northern Alaska, are at least in part because the person in the name requires attention. But it is also about the responsibility of the name-giver for “getting it right.” We move, then, from acknowledging names as potentially powerful artifacts to naming as creative action.

We have already mentioned that, when using the verb “to name,” (some) analytical philosophers do not distinguish between their assignation (I name